Found guilty by association: in defence of the Quinean criterion

Abstract

Much recent work in metaontology challenges the so-called 'Quinean tradition' in metaphysics. Especially prominently, Amie Thomasson argues for a highly permissive ontology over ontologies which eliminate many entities. I am concerned with disputing not her ontological claim, but the methodology behind her rejection of eliminativism—I focus on ordinary objects. Thomasson thinks that by endorsing the Quinean criterion of ontological commitment eliminativism goes wrong; a theory eschewing quantification over a kind may nonetheless be committed to its existence. I argue that, contrary to Thomasson's claims, we should retain the Quinean criterion. Her arguments show that many eliminativist positions are flawed, but their flaws lie elsewhere: the Quinean criterion is innocent. Showing why reveals the importance of pragmatism in ontology.

In §1 I compare Thomasson's account and the eliminativist views to which it stands in opposition. In §2 I re-construct Thomasson's reasoning behind rejecting the Quinean criterion. In §3 I defend the Quinean criterion, showing that the eliminativists' flaws are not consequences of applying the Quinean criterion, before explaining the criterion's importance when properly understood. I conclude that Thomasson, though right to criticise the methodology of ordinary-object eliminativists, is wrong to identify the Quinean criterion as the source of their mistake.

1 Science and common sense in conflict

Take as a starting-point two intuitions:

(Ordinary) There are chairs, footballs, rocks, etc.

(Simple) Physics tells us that a description of the world in terms of interactions between fundamental particles is in some sense complete.[1]

Call the objects vaguely picked out by (Ordinary) 'ordinary objects'. Many metaphysicians have been exercised by the question whether one should accept ordinary objects in light of the character and success of scientific explanation:

[1]If the reader finds this implausible they may substitute another intuition in lieu of (Simple); I will not take a stand here and this intuition is merely the most straightforward example. Specifically, the reader may expand the domain that purports to achieve completeness without undermining the apparent conflict as long as the associated scientific ontology remains sparser than the plenitude endorsed by (Ordinary).

whether one can reasonably hold (Ordinary) and (Simple) together. This worry comes from a *prima facie* conflict between saying that we are done describing how things are before we get round to even mentioning ordinary objects and maintaining that they nonetheless exist. There is certainly something calling for explanation here, but some have seen it as particularly pressing. To see why, we now examine eliminativism about ordinary objects.

1.1 Ordinary-object eliminativism

This class of responses to the conflict holds that one *cannot* reasonably maintain both (Ordinary) and (Simple) so, in view of the support for (Simple) implicit in scientific success, we must reject (Ordinary). It would be unhelpful to catalogue every route to this conclusion; we will rehearse just two.

Merricks (2001) holds that (Ordinary) and (Simple) are in conflict because together they produce causal overdetermination. Consider an event 'as of' a football breaking a window, that is, one that would typically be described by:

(1) The (kicking of the) football caused the window to break.

When it comes to providing a precise account of this event, physics is apparently privileged because its explanation fits desiderata like generality, simplicity, and repeatability. In the clearest description of the event in physical terms, however, the description 'the football' does not feature. The following statement would be closer:

(2) The (movement of the) particles $p_1 \dots p_n$ caused the window to break.[2]

What then caused the window to break? One might think it incoherent to claim that both the football and $p_1 \dots p_n$ caused the window to break, but if not it nonetheless looks unnecessary to identify both the football and $p_1 \dots p_n$ as causes of the breakage. It would be bold indeed to reject the microphysical description in response to this, so Merricks claims that for reasons of parsimony we should reject (1) and, generalising, that we should accept only simples into our ontology since they do all the causal 'work' required. As the objects endorsed by (Ordinary) are all complex the intuition is then clearly ruled out, resolving the conflict.

Van Inwagen (1990) and Horgan and Potrč (2000) argue against ordinary objects from a different perspective. They are interested in answering the special composition question:

(SCQ) When is there some y such that the xs compose y?

Their answers to the question are different: van Inwagen's positive answer to (SCQ) is "When the xs constitute a life," making living things the only complex concrete objects, whereas Horgan and Potrč hold that "When there are no simples distinct from the xs," best answers (SCQ), making the only complex concrete object the 'blobject' which makes up the whole cosmos. Yet they agree that no satisfactory answer to (SCQ) endorses ordinary objects. Amie Thomasson offers roughly this re-construction of their reasoning:

[2]This description, assuming that it is better than (1), is for obvious reasons only marginally so (if the football shouldn't figure, nor should the window). It would be cumbersome to modify the statement wholesale, so in this and later cases attention should be paid only to the contextually salient terms.

(3) No acceptable uniform answer to (SCQ) gives us ordinary objects,

(4) No non-uniform answer to (SCQ) can be acceptable,

(5) If no acceptable answer to (SCQ) says there are ordinary objects, there are no ordinary objects,

(6) Therefore, there are no ordinary objects. (2007, 127)

Briefly, (3) is justified by noting the diverse existence-conditions needed to explain all the varieties of ordinary object. (4) is motivated by intuitions about what constitutes satisfactory metaphysical explanation—metaphysical questions should not be treated as settled by unexplained disjunctions. (5) follows from endorsing (SCQ) as a way of framing this ontological debate. (6) is entailed by (3)–(5). To put the argument informally, the concern is that there is no systematic way of understanding composition such that ordinary objects exist but extraordinary ones do not: why, for instance, should one plurality of particles constitute a table, and another a lamp, while those pluralities together don't constitute a table-lamp?[3] Not wanting to proliferate ontology, an eliminativist of this stripe discards ordinary objects, while the objects covered by (Simple) are protected because they are uniformly explicable (they make up the base of xs without which (SCQ) can't get going).

Further details of these two compatible ways to motivate ordinary-object eliminativism are unimportant for current purposes. We now move on to Thomasson's response. Note that one could respond to the problematic conflict by accepting the intuitions' incompatibility but instead rejecting (Simple), for instance by claiming that irreducible features of reality are captured by things outside the remit of natural science (though see n. 1 for why (Simple) would only be comprehensively rejected if we accepted a lot more entities), or by claiming that physics does not talk about objects at all, perhaps endorsing an account like that of van Fraassen (1980). Thomasson instead insists that (Ordinary) and (Simple) are compatible.

1.2 Easy ontology and ordinary objects

Thomasson's position (2007; 2014) is that ordinary objects are compatible with the simples posited by natural science because they are not in any appropriate sense rivals, and ordinary objects' existence is a simple consequence of basic statements about the world. In recent work Thomasson refers to her approach as neo-Carnapian, but I will avoid this terminology because of the complications it brings to the discussion.[4] Instead I will use the less controversial name, *easy ontology*. I will briefly explain Thomasson's positive account and her response

[3] As the minutiae of the argument are not central to my paper, I have freely used 'plurality' for elegance without worrying about the fact that this term smuggles in singular reference.

[4] The appellation 'neo-Carnapian' is problematic because many different people (especially Putnam (1987) and Hirsch (2009)) have claimed inheritance of Carnap's intellectual project, and while Thomasson is aware of this and argues for her right to the classification in her (2014) I do not wish to invite questions about that controversy here. Her view also has striking connections to neo-Fregeanism acknowledged by Thomasson herself (see her (2009, 2) and (2014, ch. 3)), because its transformations from ontologically innocent statements to ontologically committing statements draw on ideas from the work of Hale and Wright (2001, 2009), but I will also avoid stressing this connection.

to eliminativists before exploring the main ground of contention for this paper: parsimony.

Thomasson claims that evaluating the truth of statements involving any singular or general term requires an understanding of that term's application conditions, determined by the kind of thing it denotes. To take a key example of hers (2007, 58), if you point to a hill on which some physical mass is located and say "I hereby baptise *that thing* Smod," if I can only tell that you are naming whatever is sticking out of the hillside, I can't answer questions like "Would Smod survive a fire?" or "Would Smod survive disassembly?" If you have something in mind in your baptism, it has to be identified under a sortal, e.g., *physical aggregate*, *organism*, *artifact*, otherwise you would not be genuinely individuating something. If things must be identified under sortals, though, the application conditions associated with those sortals will provide a minimal conceptual content to statements concerning them—the very content that answers questions like those asked about Smod. These contents, she claims, produce *analytic entailments* that tell us, e.g., "If there is a continuous portion of mineraloid matter clearly differentiable from its surroundings, there is a rock (in that space)." However, as 'it's overwhelmingly obvious that the world *does* satisfy these conditions' (Thomasson 2007, 159), there are rocks. The same follows for all manner of other ordinary objects, whose existence is thus guaranteed by the application-conditions of sortal terms alongside simple empirical facts. This allows us to see physical simples and ordinary objects not as rivals but as inextricably linked by sortals; if the simples are arranged in the right way it is a direct consequence that the sortal applies and therefore that the ordinary object exists.

1.3 Overcoming parsimony

As things stand these two positions might seem at an impasse. Although Thomasson claims to show that there is nothing especially problematic about accepting both ordinary objects and simples, she acknowledges that on a common understanding of the significance of parsimony, the eliminativist has an advantage over the easy ontologist. The latter does better at satisfying common-sense intuitions, but the former looks more parsimonious. She insists, however, that the parsimony claimed by the eliminativist is illusory. If this is true it places easy ontology on much firmer ground than eliminativism: while it is a widely-accepted benefit of positions like easy ontology that they endorse certain common-sense claims, the eliminativist tends to play down these benefits, saying that their approach has minimal costs while providing far more substantial gains of parsimony. If there are no such gains, the easy ontologist deals a serious blow to the eliminativist's ambitions.

How does Thomasson argue this? The eliminativist claims to be committed only to simples, while the easy ontologist is obviously committed to far more than that. The eliminativist then reasons via Occam's razor that as multiple entities must not be posited without necessity, their sparser ontology is at an advantage. Thomasson undermines this by denying that the posits are 'without necessity', which she does through a critique of the Quinean criterion of ontological commitment.[5]

[5]This critique places Thomasson's account in a similar position to a number of other criticisms

2 Throwing out the bathwater

The eliminativist accepts that there are certain explanatory criteria for the success of their project: it certainly won't be satisfying if the eliminativist insists that there are no ordinary objects yet refuses to explain how things actually are. Furthermore it is incumbent upon the eliminativist to explain the intuition (Ordinary)—why did it seem in order to speak as if those things existed? Their standard strategy involves appeal to the Quinean criterion of ontological commitment.

(Criterion)

> A theory is committed to those and only those entities to which the bound variables of the theory must be capable of referring in order that the affirmations made in the theory be true. (Quine 1948, 33)

Take the statement:

(7) Alex is sitting in a chair.

How is the eliminativist to understand such statements? Following (Criterion), the obvious translation of the sentence into the idiom of first-order predicate logic (to determine where bound variables occur in the statement) reads something like:

(8) $\exists x(\text{Chair}(x) \wedge \text{Sit}(A, x))$.

The eliminativist, however, offers an alternative translation into what Thomasson calls a 'language of refuge' (2007, 164). Though the above statement would commit us to chairs, of which the eliminativist says there are none, we can instead say

(9) $\exists x_1 \ldots \exists x_n(\text{Chairwise}(x_1 \ldots x_n) \wedge Sit^*(A, x_1, \ldots, x_n))$.

Here 'chairwise' denotes a relation in which some things stand to each other just in situations where one would ordinarily utter statements relevantly like (7).[6] Thus the bound variables of the theory giving (7)'s truth-conditions need not refer to complex objects satisfying the predicate 'chair', but only to objects standing in the relation 'chairwise', which could be simples. To return to the challenges with which we opened this section, the condition for the eliminativist's success is then the ability to provide such paraphrases for statements we typically hold true, and they claim that statements like (8) seem in order despite repudiating chairs because a straightforward and tempting translation of (7) would commit us to chairs.

According to Thomasson, some sleight-of-hand has taken place here. The form of a theory does not always give a full account of its ontological commitments by her reckoning because when a set of conditions is described one may thereby commit oneself to the existence of things fulfilling those conditions. Take the above purported application conditions for 'rock': by introducing a 'rockwise'-relation, the eliminativist might aim to avoid a commitment to rocks, but the eliminativist

of Quinean metaontology that focus on permissiveness, e.g. Hirsch (2005); Fine (2009); Schaffer (2009). However these rely on different notions: quantifier variance for the former, and grounding for the latter two. Thus while my defence is relevant to these other positions, further exposition and argument would be required to fully apply it to them.

[6]Note also that Sit and Sit^* are not the same relation: the former is ordinarily a two-place relation between sitter and sat-in, while the latter is (at least) an $n+1$-place relation between sitter and sit-in-able arrangement of n simples.

and the easy ontologist in fact agree about the worldly conditions under which the term 'rockwise' applies. The eliminativist says "I don't quantify over rocks but only over simples arranged rockwise, making my ontology more parsimonious than your rocky ontology." The easy ontologist can then ask, "Under what conditions does the 'rockwise' relation apply?" and provided the eliminativist gives an adequate answer the easy ontologist will insist that those just are the conditions under which there exists a rock constituted by said simples, representable as follows:

$$(10) \quad \forall x_1 \ldots \forall x_n[\text{Chairwise}(x_1 \ldots x_n) \rightarrow \exists y(\text{Chair}(y) \wedge Const(x_1 \ldots x_n, y))].^{7}$$

If (10) is true, then the existence of chairs is entailed by (9), a statement which the eliminativist accepts! Furthermore she thinks that (10) is part of the content of the concept *chair* even though it need not be part of the theory being analysed. Thus the eliminativist is guilty of halting the conversation before it is over. They might respond that there *is* some condition that is not met, but most candidates for this are rejected by Thomasson as being methodologically out of place. For instance, one might say that the condition *constituting a genuine unity* is not met, but it looks like this condition is *ad hoc* and represents nothing more than dogmatic insistence that certain candidates fail to be real objects.

Thomasson thus declares that (Criterion), by virtue of over-extending the demands of parsimony, is a bad metaontological principle.[8] While parsimony can apply when seeking genuine causes, e.g. in murder investigations (where, *ceteris paribus*, one murderer is a better hypothesis than two), eliminability in the statement of a theory does not track eliminability from ontology. (Criterion), Thomasson says, describes a sufficient condition on commitment but crucially not a necessary one because theories can be made to quantify over fewer entities than they are actually committed to. Generating commitments with (Criterion) would therefore leave us with the further task of checking the application conditions of our concepts and determining whether their content had been accommodated. Furthermore, while one could proceed in this two-stage manner, Thomasson claims that her method would uncover any commitments found by (Criterion) anyway. She concludes that a metaontology treating fulfilment of (Criterion) as necessary and sufficient for ontological commitment ought to be abandoned in favour a metaontology informed by considerations about the conceptual content of the singular and general terms we employ.

Before we look closer at this argument, one point must be cleared up: given the argument on which Thomasson relies, is the easy ontologist committed to the uselessness of paraphrase? To be brief, no. Thomasson acknowledges that paraphrase is sometimes informative and useful. However she thinks that paraphrase can only

[7]This illustrates both a justification for the possible label 'neo-Fregean' and the need for a qualification. While similar to typical neo-Fregean transformations like Hume's Principle, this is not a biconditional for Thomasson because being particulate is not part of the concept *chair*. The key feature remains that an ontologically committing transformation demonstrates the hidden commitments of the original, unproblematic statement.

[8]Thomasson claims this only conditional on the existence of analytic entailments. Quine was not ignorant of this kind of argument, she thinks, but had an easy way out because of his scepticism about analyticity. This raises questions both about Quine's views on analyticity and meaning and about whether eliminativists' views require a rejection of said notions, which must be left for elsewhere.

be helpfully applied in situations where no analytic entailments derive from the conceptual content of the terms involved. The utility of paraphrase in ontology has been motivated by analogy to post-Copernican understandings of "The Sun moved behind the trees," moving from an understanding of the sentence entailing the Sun's movement to one entailing only a change of relative position (van Inwagen 1990), but we are free to reinterpret statements like this as it is implausible to suppose that 'the Sun' ever had a conceptual content which entailed that the Sun moved.

3 Rescuing the baby

Thomasson thinks that eliminativists about ordinary objects have it too easy: that their claims to avoid commitment to ordinary objects through their strategies of paraphrase are ill-founded. I am inclined to agree on this front, but disagree with Thomasson's diagnosis of the problem. She finds fault with (Criterion) for mistakenly absolving us of commitments, but I claim that in fact (Criterion) does not sanction ordinary-object eliminativism unless it is supplemented by independent principles. It must be elsewhere that the blame lies.

3.1 Ontology as interpretation

Though van Inwagen (1998, 2009) denies that (Criterion) can be parsed as an informative simple statement within Quinean metaontology in his influential attempts to articulate that metaontology,[9] our above quote (§2) seems to provide at least a reasonable statement of its content. Let us first deal with the more straightforward parts of assessment. For our purposes we can be liberal about what a theory is—just treat a theory as a set of statements. Note also that on the Quinean conception it is the theory that incurs commitment to entities so our commitment to some entity requires that it be *our* theory that is committed to its existence. We can treat a statement as part of our theory when it is either explicitly endorsed by some plausibly large critical mass of members of the community or is entailed by a set of such statements. Lastly, it has been observed by, e.g., Bricker (2014, §1.1) that when talking of Quine's criterion one can intend a weaker, descriptive version that simply provides the commitments of a given theory, or a stronger, prescriptive version that tells us that our all-things-considered commitments should be those of our best theory. We will typically speak of the descriptive version because that captures the core content of (Criterion): however I also show below that considering the strong reading should not change our verdict.

The interesting, and difficult, questions arise with regard to the 'must be capable of referring' part of (Criterion). To what must a statement be capable of referring for it to be true? There is no automatic method for answering this question, except insofar as it is determined by the things that are candidates to be

[9]Concerns have been raised by, e.g., Eklund (2006b, 96), Price (2009), and Jenkins (2010, 884) about the viability and accuracy of the common understanding of Quinean metaontology. Thomasson seems to be alive to this concern, describing her opponents in her (2014, ch. 1) as 'neo-Quinean'.

substituted in for variables in the statement's translation into 'canonical notation'. Thomasson is aware of this. Nonetheless, she treats (Criterion) as a rather blunt tool and so, it seems, do eliminativists. Statements like (2) and (9) are treated as in themselves avoiding quantification over ordinary objects. On this assumption it is hard to object to eliminativists' translations, and accordingly Thomasson does not complain about them, saying

> I have no intention of impugning the clever paraphrases devised by van Inwagen and others, which (when properly done) properly preserve the role human intentions, practices, and so on play in the truth-conditions of these sentences. (2007, 161)

Thus the eliminativist can more-or-less stipulate that the relation in the paraphrase tracks the problematic concept: if we understand the predicate 'chair', we understand the relation 'chairwise'. However, two points are in order.

First, the overall theory is significant to whether we can plausibly understand these translations. For a simple case, suppose that we consider whether to accept some kind F into our theory: if the remainder of the theory we are operating within provides a more useful, explanatory account of the phenomena in which F purportedly figures in terms of two sub-kinds F_1 and F_2, the Quinean is more likely to hold that Fs need not be in our ontology than if we lacked such sub-kinds, especially if the reasons for accepting F_1 and F_2 were not directly related to the reasons for considering F. Thomasson often neglects this, identifying the focus as on accepting '*fewer things*' (2007, 154) and only rarely approaching the question in terms of kinds whose explanatory power might cut across one another. It thus bears on what we take the commitments of (2) and (9) to be whether we take statements involving ordinary objects to be excisable across the board.

Second, the question of what the variables of a theory *must* be capable of ranging over cannot be a merely formal or representational constraint. One could take a theory's variables to range simply over the natural numbers by using the right model-theoretic methods: find a model for the theory, by the downward Löwenheim-Skolem theorem find a model of it with cardinality ω (provided the uncontroversial assumption that the language is countable), and design a 1-1 proxy function taking terms to natural numbers. Quine explains the possibility of such a move in his (1968, 206–8). This does not mean that each theory including mathematical truths should have its variables understood as ranging over only the natural numbers because that fails too badly as an explanation of how we understand the world. By the same token, one can provide obviously unintended permutations of reference, following Putnam (1977),[10] if we lack this constraint.

Here's the rub. The eliminativist's insistence that one can offer an analysis of these statements without quantifying over ordinary objects does not tell us whether one can offer a *good* analysis of such statements fitting that requirement. We start with a community from which certain utterances issue. It is up to us to determine what overall structure to assign those utterances, and without some justification it looks implausible that some relation like 'chairwise' could be made sense of unless it were appropriate to say "There are chairs." As noted above, if we

[10]Or indeed following Quine (1960). Putnam's arguments arise from the same ground as Quine's arguments for the inscrutability of reference, though they extend it to cover, e.g., modal statements.

understand 'chair' we understand 'chairwise': just as well we understand 'chair' then!

This observation might not move the eliminativist, who will insist that epistemological notions do not flawlessly track ontological ones, so 'no one should reject eliminativism on the grounds that, to understand what it is to be arranged statuewise, one must first know what statues are supposed to be' (Merricks 2001, 7). Merricks motivates this claim by analogy, saying that it would be absurd to argue for an ontologically committing understanding of 'wearing a smile' by saying that to know what it is to smile one must first know what smiles are supposed to be. This is indeed a bad argument, but I would say that this is mostly because one *doesn't* need to first know what a smile is in order to know what it is to smile. On the other hand, as Merricks notes, the predicate 'statue' plays an important role not just for understanding 'statuewise' but for 'what makes it the case that certain atomic features are those upon which, if there were statues, statue composition would supervene' (ibid.). I find it difficult to see therefore how Merricks' claim can be persuasive. How far epistemology and ontology come apart is a fraught question, but it is implausible that they can come so far apart that understanding how we come to individuate as we do is irrelevant.[11] To hold otherwise is to endorse a conception of metaphysics on which its task is entirely distinct from the task of understanding people as language-users.

This sits poorly with a Quinean approach to ontology—at least if, as we should, we take Quine as having some authority in delineating that approach.[12] He clearly says that ordinary objects are a benchmark against which the very adequacy of the theory that is supposed to threaten them is checked:

> We cannot properly represent [humans] as inventing a myth of physical objects to fit past and present sense data, for past ones are lost except to memory; and memory, far from being a straightforward register of past sense data, usually depends on past posits of physical objects. The positing of physical objects must be seen not as an ex post facto systematization of data, but as a move prior to which no appreciable data would be available to systematize. (Quine 1976, 251)

Quine (1995) equated explaining and explaining away (where the latter is arguably equivalent to elimination), but by his lights the requirement of explanation, and thus of elimination, is not met in the case of chairwise and statuewise relations. The objects they are based on figure importantly in building and justifying the very theory that eliminativists seek to use to explain away their existence. Without specific motivation for thinking that we can discount that explanatory role once our theory is under way, a Quinean approach should not sanction eliminativism.

The eliminativist might maintain that they are not in trouble because it is only appropriate to say that chairs exist either in a loose sense (Merricks' defence) or when 'outside the ontology room' (van Inwagen's defence). To say this, however,

[11] Merricks' discussion of this issue at times suggests that his target is someone who holds that considerations of conceptual dependence render eliminativism absurd. That these results do not render it impossible to be an eliminativist, however, does not prevent them from loading the dice against it.

[12] In support of this, Matti Eklund describes the Quinean approach as a 'linguistic [approach] to ontology' (2006a, 327). There is much more to be said about how this feature of Quinean metaontology impacts the approach, but that goes beyond the remit of this paper.

is to introduce new and problematic principles. By abandoning the requirement that there be a robust connection between language-use and our metaphysical theory, eliminativists open up the possibility of theories whose relevance is highly questionable. On such a view we should allow for metaphysical reality to differ drastically from what can be clearly expressed. A case in point:

> Imagine a world consisting entirely of gunkish, jello-ish, stuff. Suppose that this jello-world is literally partless, and yet also exhibits local variation... what would be an appropriate way to describe how various features are instantiated by the jello in various spatiotemporally local ways? One natural-looking way would be to introduce a linguistic/conceptual framework that posits certain kinds of discrete entities, and attributes various features to them. (Horgan and Potrc, 2000, 249–50)

This picture makes it totally unclear why language is at all relevant to ontology. It's mysterious how to consistently describe a 'literally partless' entity with local variations since these would seem to be differences in its parts, so if this is nevertheless possible then it seems pointless to worry about paraphrase because language is not equipped to capture the fantastical extremes of possibility.[13] This would place us in the remit of what Thomas Hofweber has called *esoteric* metaphysics, on which conception 'one needs to understand distinctly metaphysical terms in order for one to understand what the questions are that metaphysics tries to answer' (Hofweber 2009, 267).

That kind of approach would arise if, for instance, we were to accept a 'conceivability implies possibility' principle where conceivability outstrips linguistic expression and is authoritative for metaphysics. An even clearer route to esoteric metaphysics comes from the aforementioned 'ontology room' move that denies any interest on the metaphysician's part in understanding the linguistic community, insisting instead that 'only metaphysicians... have ever considered—ever entertained, ever grasped, ever held before their minds—[metaphysical propositions]' (van Inwagen 2014, 6). If other eliminativists wish to distance themselves from these extra assumptions, the *onus* is on them to demonstrate that a more austere Quinean approach does indeed sanction their account, and no such demonstration is in evidence.

Indeed (Criterion) itself is, in Hofweber's terms, distinctly 'egalitarian', that is, it takes the key metaphysical questions to be 'expressed in ordinary, everyday terms, accessible to all' (2009, 266). This is immediately clear on (Criterion)'s descriptive reading since then it simply tells us the commitments of a theory without discounting or altering its statements but it is true even on the stronger, prescriptive reading. The descriptive version of (Criterion) looks for what must be the case for a theory taken as a whole to be true, while the prescriptive version of the same looks for what must be the case for the *best* theory taken as a whole to be true. Neither version makes any reference to goals of specifically metaphysical importance. Of course if what one has to clarify turns out to be a rarefied version of our shared theory then, provided it was rarefied by metaphysical considerations,

[13] It is relevant to note that (Horgan and Potrč, 2008, ch. 3) describe their approach as something one retreats to if one finds the Quinean approach ultimately unsatisfactory, meaning that the approach is not an extension to Quineanism but a revision to it.

we would have esoteric metaphysics, but however this move was made *it would not be (Criterion) that took us down this path.*[14]

I have suggested that (Criterion) won't, without implausible supplementary claims, sanction the elimination of ordinary objects. This suggests a problem: if it doesn't sanction such reinterpretation, do we even need (Criterion)? Is it just a platitudinous requirement to 'read off' the commitments of overall theory? No: I will close by briefly indicating some complexities for (Criterion) is useful. As well as serving the purpose of showing that (Criterion) is not platitudinous, these cases are somewhat problematic for thinkers like Thomasson.

3.2 Not so easy

While in the case of ordinary objects Thomasson's arguments have initial plausibility, elsewhere it is not obvious how her analysis should proceed. She defends her account on more general grounds in Thomasson (2014) but this assumes the efficacy of her rejection of Quinean metaontology and focusses on defending the coherence of her own position. As we have found reason to be suspicious of her claim to undermine the Quinean approach, I will instead offer some object-level issues on which the Quinean might enjoy an advantage over Thomasson's easy ontologist. It would take much time to give a satisfactory account of the intricacies, but I will briefly state some very commonplace examples that require us to think more carefully about what we need to quantify over.

3.2.1 Metaphor

Take the statement

(11) Alex has a monkey on her back,

and its flat-footed translation

(12) $\exists x(\text{Monkey}(x) \wedge x \text{ is on the back of } a)$.

It seems part of the content of the term 'monkey' that when people meet worldly conditions like high stress-levels it is felicitous to utter statements like (11), providing easy existence-conditions for these special kinds of monkey.[15]

[14]Indeed whether the outcome is even possible hinges on what one takes the role of the 'best theory' element of the prescriptive version of (Criterion) to be. It could be argued that it is unavoidably tied up with Quinean naturalism, and it's far from clear that *that* approach is consistent with esoteric metaphysics since it will rule out special metaphysical reasons to reject something despite its explanatory role.

[15]An anonymous referee points out that one might argue that felicity is irrelevant here since in such cases the relevant concept's application conditions are evidently not met. However this reply would only work if we assumed a particular analysis from the outset. The felicity of the statement provides *prima facie* warrant for taking it seriously, where the paradigmatic way of taking a statement seriously is to treat it as true. To suppose that this use of 'monkey' violates the term's application conditions simply assumes in advance that it does not fall within the range of uses that determine the term's application conditions. This would be a bad approach to take generally, since there are many cases where a decision regarding metaphor is difficult; even statements like "I'm going down to the shops" have sometimes been alleged to involve metaphor. We simply do not have sufficient consensus on metaphor to actually execute a directive to discount metaphor when examining application conditions.

Of course one might ultimately analyse (11) using a literal/non-literal distinction, or by various means of distinguishing what is said in a metaphor from what is meant, but it isn't clear that in an ordinary utterance of this metaphor I'm even non-literally saying, or saying without meaning, anything like (12). If either contextualism (see Bezuidenhout 2001) or non-cognitivism (see Davidson 1978) is ever interpretatively appropriate, even for dead and dying metaphors, we might find it highly unattractive to attribute ontological commitments, even figurative ones, despite surface form and the availability of transformation rules from stress-invoking statements to metaphorical monkey statements. The focus sanctioned by (Criterion) on overall theory over individual conceptual content makes it easier to see a route to a reasonable interpretation than on the easy ontology approach.[16]

3.2.2 Figures of speech

Certain not clearly metaphorical figures of speech are also problematic without (Criterion), e.g.

(13) She has a lot of smarts,

(14) Something tells me you're right,

(15) Some things are better left unsaid.

On a 'deflationary' theory like Thomasson's[17] we might find ontologically committing analyses of these acceptable: indeed Thomasson suggests so in her (2013, 1042–3). However, despite these statements not being terribly threatening given that there is no risk of being asked to present before one's peers the things such that they are better left unsaid, it might look like a straightforward misunderstanding of ordinary language here to give the ontologically committing analyses. In this sense one accusation Thomasson levels at eliminativists, of deviating from language-use, can be aimed back at her unless she accepts an additional complexity in analysing ontological commitments that importantly seems to be captured by (Criterion). The proponent of (Criterion) need not treat the ontologically committing analyses of (13)–(15) as legitimate but with a certain 'weirdness', as long as they have available interpretations without commitments that do not cause trouble elsewhere in the theory.[18]

[16]This presupposes that the Quinean can survive a different challenge mounted by Yablo (1998) that their approach requires a sharp literal/non-literal distinction that cannot in fact be given. I cannot respond to this challenge here, but it seems that if it is a problem it threatens all attempts to answer the ontological question so is not a specific threat to the Quinean.

[17]See (Sider, 2011, ch. 9) for extended, if unsympathetic, consideration of variants of deflationism.

[18]Thomasson (2014, 264–5) also proposes an alternative solution for cases like the term 'sake'. She says that these terms lack any 'coapplication conditions' that would allow people to make judgements of identity and distinctness about the relevant entities, so should not be seen as ontologically committing. I doubt, however, that there is a divide as strong as Thomasson needs in this respect. Certain judgements of distinctness at least are likely to be assented to: for instance, if actions done for A's sake are against B's interests and vice versa, I imagine that most English speakers would say that A's sake and B's sake must be distinct. One can't make judgements across the board, but as Thomasson accepts our concepts typically have limitations in this respect. In response to a similar worry she concedes (2014, 265, n. 8) that this alternative might not be viable.

3.2.3 Going beyond usage

A final, more general, concern comes when we consider how to arrive at the transformation rules for ordinary language. Given that language-use is varied, often inconsistent and always finite, the easy ontologist's transformations will not be sanctioned based *purely* on use. We are unlikely to find that complete application-conditions simply fall out of common practice, but if we move outside actual use easy ontology rapidly inflates. If I can render consistent and pad out application-conditions for ordinary terms, it seems that I can just as easily construct suitable rules for arbitrary combinations, leaving us endorsing table-lamps, trout-turkeys, and stranger entities. There is after all nothing missing from the principle

$$(16) \quad \forall x \forall y[(\text{Table}(x) \wedge \text{Lamp}(y)) \rightarrow \exists z(Const(x, y, z) \wedge \text{Table-lamp}(z))],$$

apart from the absence of 'table-lamp' from our vocabulary, which is a matter of historical accident. The concerns of §§3.2.1 and 3.2.2 are in a sense restrictions of this concern, so as before Thomasson can insist that deflationism takes the sting out. However, accepting these entities loses her the endorsement of common sense.

One could press this worry in two ways. First one might say that it is almost as much of a mandate of common sense that there are no trout-turkeys as that there *are* tables. Thomasson (2007, 183–5) responds to this claim by saying that common sense has nothing to say about table-lamps, trout-turkeys, etc., and that a careful explanation of the terms' content would lead lead most people to accept the objects as non-threatening. This objection and reply appear to be at a stalemate because they rely on empirical speculation about folk judgements. It is unclear how one could justifiably claim to identify the extent of common-sense judgements, let alone to evaluate modifications to common sense, but even ignoring this stumbling block we now find Thomasson's position at the mercy of how people happen to respond to such novel concepts.

One might alternatively make the less drastic objection that there are substantial limitations to common sense since we can at least agree that common sense doesn't say that there *are* table-lamps. Common sense also seems vulnerable to the possibility of inconsistent usage (either intra- or inter-personal), so wherever we reach the limits of common sense we will need to say something further, and we lack an evident reason to choose Thomasson's strategy over others. If Thomasson wished to make her strategy unequivocally easy she would be caught here between giving an incomplete and possibly inconsistent ontology of ordinary language, and venturing into philosophically contentious claims by trying to provide a consistent and general theory not limited by usage. In fact she says more reasonably that inconsistencies should be weeded out by charitable interpretation (2014, 271) and that cases where we don't get a complete answer can be decided by stipulation (ibid., §6.3).

These responses, while reasonable, raise a final worry. Interpretative charity, and ontological legislation, are not evidently easy methods to apply. It is hard to know what best respects requirements of charity (see Dennett (1987)) and the consequences of legislating on an ontological debate may well be difficult to track. Thomasson thinks, it seems, that the cases involving these are rare enough that they should not feature centrally in her metaontology. However if, as I have claimed, (Criterion) allows us to take a pragmatic approach that sometimes favours ordinary use and sometimes favours simplicity, then provided it is not tied to an

inegalitarian conception of metaphysics it will involve the same considerations of charity and the same capacity for legislation as Thomasson includes. It is then not clear that her approach in fact casts aside (Criterion)—but one might further wonder whether, once it is divorced from esoteric applications, Thomasson would want to target (Criterion) with her critique.[19]

Conclusion

In this paper I have claimed that while Thomasson is right to suspect ordinary-object eliminativists of getting their results through bad principles, she is wrong to identify the Quinean criterion of ontological commitment as one of these. Other principles, like adherence to 'ontology room' metaphysics, drive the justification for ordinary-object eliminativism; furthermore the Quinean criterion is informative in contexts that Thomasson's approach struggles with. Thomasson lights on an important concern: that metaphysicians tend to play fast and loose with our language as if something remarkable were meant by terms like 'table'. However respecting this should not lead us to treat the project of interpreting our theory as always easy.[20]

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